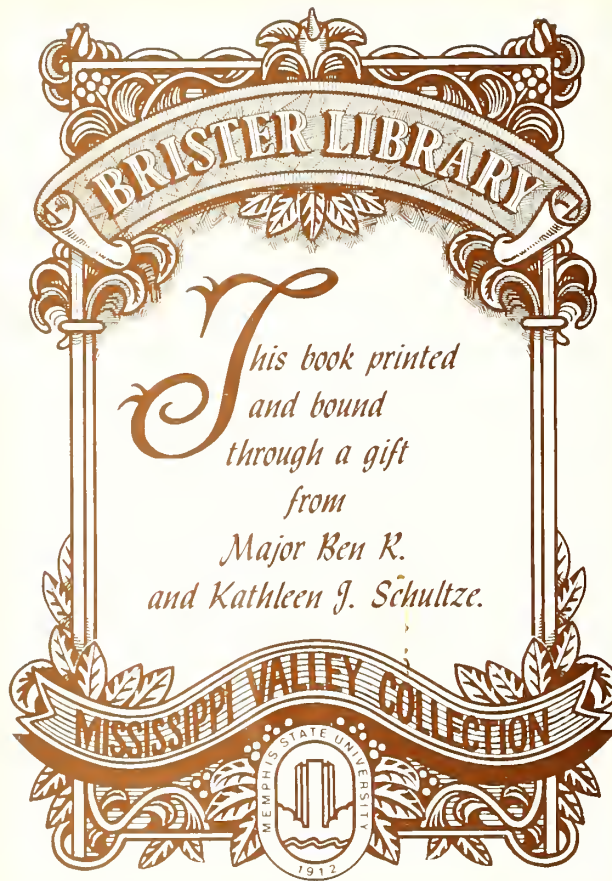


AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE MEMPHIS JEWISH COMMUNITY
INTERVIEWS WITH
DR. JAMES A. WAX

BY - BERKLEY KALIN
ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE
MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY



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MAY 28, 1970

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PLACE

Memphis, Tenn

DATE

5/24/68James A. Wax
(Interviewee)

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THIS RECORDING IS BEING MADE FOR THE MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE PROJECT: A HISTORY OF THE MEMPHIS JEWISH COMMUNITY. THE DATE IS MAY 28, 1970. THE INTERVIEWEE IS DR. JAMES A. WAX, THE RABBI OF TEMPLE ISRAEL. THE INTERVIEW IS TAKING PLACE AT TEMPLE ISRAEL. THE INTERVIEWER IS DR. BERKLEY KALIN.

DR. KALIN: I see that you were born the 20th of December, 1912. That makes you. .

RABBI WAX: Fifty-seven.

DR. KALIN: Very good. Just for the record I thought that you might mention something of your background, your various positions. You started out as an assistant rabbi at. . .

RABBI WAX: United Hebrew in St. Louis.

DR. KALIN: United Hebrew in St. Louis. 1941-'43. Associate rabbi at United Hebrew from 1946. Acting rabbi at Northshore Congregation in Glencoe, Illinois. Jointly?

RABBI WAX: No acting. Both rabbis were in military service. I had been rejected for the armed services, and I went there for that interval to replace the two rabbis who were in the service.

DR. KALIN: I see. You became co-rabbi at Temple Israel in Memphis in 1946 until 1954, and rabbi from 1954 to present.

RABBI WAX: Yes.

DR. KALIN: Now, I really am having difficulty in starting the interview because you have had so many interesting kinds of activity. I suppose the logical point would be to compare your rabbinate with your predecessor's, Rabbi Ettelson, as to philosophy and general approach to the ministry. Do you think there is a similarity or a marked contrast?

RABBI WAX: Well, not only is there a similarity between Dr. Ettelson and myself, but also the other rabbis who have served here. All of the rabbis of this temple, five before me, were men who were interested in the community and were men who participated in community life. Dr. Ettelson and I shared the same basic philosophy about reform in Judaism. There is a difference in academic background. By that, I mean that he was more interested in the literary than I happen to be. My interests are primarily, academically speaking, in history and the social sciences. While we had the same philosophy about community service, he spent more of his time with literary groups, whereas I am more involved in social action groups. I think that's a difference. I'm not making an evaluative judgment. It's just a case of difference.

DR. KALIN: I'm doing a paper on Rabbi Fineshriber, who was here from 1912 to 1924, approximately, and would you say that there was similarity of approach between the two of you?

RABBI WAX: Yes, I guess in terms of activity, the similarity with Dr. Fineshriber would be a little closer, because he, too, was an activist and as outspoken on the issues of the day. I don't need to remind you of his work regarding the Ku Klux Klan. I think there is a greater similarity, perhaps, in the interests and activities of Rabbi Fineshriber and my own.

DR. KALIN: I see here a number of citations and awards in the race relations field. You, at one time, stated in an address before. . . Well, probably more than once you stated, that Memphis was a model city for race relations. Do you regret having made that statement?

RABBI WAX: No. I was alluding to the statement made by President Kennedy, who sent two men here from the White House to see how Memphis was working out the problem of de-segregation. It was President Kennedy's statement that at

RABBI WAX: that time (I don't remember the year, but of course, it was between (Cont'd.)

1960 and '63.) I don't remember just when he sent those men here, but at that time that was a correct statement. We were making notable progress with a minimum of resistance, and I am profoundly convinced that if the sanitation strike had been handled properly, the difficulties that did develop could all have been averted.

DR. KALIN: I think that much of the trouble stemmed from that incident.

RABBI WAX: Yes. There were two aspects to that strike. There was a very strong anti-labor attitude coupled with a racist feeling. You had two aspects, and I am convinced that if we had not had this anti-labor attitude on the part of the Mayor (and I hold the Mayor responsible); and secondly, had he not been the racist that he was, this strike could have been settled very quickly, and Memphis could have gone on and progressed.

DR. KALIN: You think that to a certain extent the racist question was a definite factor?

RABBI WAX: Yes.

DR. KALIN: Many Memphians have denied that there was any racism involved directly with the strike. Now, could you tell me something about your tie-in with the new city charter? You were instrumental in getting it adopted. I believe you were elected to assist in its composition.

RABBI WAX: Yes, I was asked if I would serve if elected on the Committee of 25. I said, "Yes." There was a meeting at the city auditorium and I was chosen. I think I received the second highest number of votes, and served on that committee that formulated the. . . It's really not a new charter, it's an amendment to the old charter.

DR. KALIN: Were you the only clergyman who was elected?

RABBI WAX: No, there was Dr. Paul Tudor Jones and one or two Negro clergymen. I'm not entirely certain. But I know that there was Dr. Jones and I from the white community and one or two from the black community.

DR. KALIN: Now, the new form of government hasn't been in effect very long. Do you think that it has been as successful as you anticipated or hoped that it would be?

RABBI WAX: Well, any form of city government would encounter great difficulty today. This is true of state government, too, because of the great demand for services and the limitation of funds. I feel that, despite the difficulties that our city faces and difficulties that other cities face, too, this form of government is perhaps more responsive than the one that we had before--the old commission form of government; in my opinion, it did not make any sense. It had men that were both the legislators and the executors of the legislation. That to me seemed to be a very awkward arrangement. I can't prove what I'm saying, but I feel that this government is more responsive.

DR. KALIN: Your year as the President of the Memphis Ministers' Association, I believe, was 1968.

RABBI WAX: Sixty-seven and sixty-eight, yes.

DR. KALIN: Was it extremely eventful?

RABBI WAX: Yes.

DR. KALIN: We had one of our great leaders assassinated in Memphis and our worst strike, probably, in the history of Memphis. You were the first Jewish clergyman to serve as head of the association.

RABBI WAX: Yes. Well, when I went into office I had set forth, or expressed the idea, that I thought that the Association should be involved in community matters; that we ought to do something; and this was the line which we followed

RABBI WAX: all through that year. Of course, in the spring of the year came the (Cont'd.)

sanitation strike. I do not remember exactly the different functions in which we were engaged, but it was geared to action during that year.

DR. KALIN: Well, the strike probably interfered with many activities which were planned.

RABBI WAX: Well, I don't know. Right after I was elected, and that must have been in May, 1967, there was a question of recreational facilities for children in the poor neighborhoods. We called a special meeting of the Association and adopted a resolution which was sent to the Mayor and the commissioners. It was gratifying that they paid attention to the resolution and some recreational facilities were established for the children. I think that was the first thing that we did. I don't remember the specific legislation, but we did send letters to the members of the legislature concerning certain legislation which we thought had a distinct moral connotation.

DR. KALIN: May I ask you something about the state of religion in America? Well, what I was thinking of is that we get various opinions. One opinion is that the young, and particularly the hippie group, have a yearning for a spiritual experience and need, for a spiritual experience. And the other is that religion is dead. This suggests that churches are in danger. Religion is strong, but organized churches are in danger. And thirdly, if this is the case, what possible effect would it have on reformed Jews?

RABBI WAX: The state of religion in America is weak. It is weaker than it was, and I think will persist in being weaker. The institutions of religion--the church and the synagogue--have not been effective. They don't speak in the idiom of the time. Not just the young, but many adults feel that the institutions of religion are not relevant, and I have to concur, to a degree at least, with

RABBI WAX: that statement. The young people have not necessarily turned their
(Cont'd.)

back on religion, but rather the institutions of religion. I feel that Reform Judaism is an interpretation of Judaism that is relevant; that can appeal to young people because it is contemporary in its outlook, its orientation; and does confront itself with the issues of the day. Unless religion keeps up with the times, it is going to be left behind; and what I like about Reform Judaism is that it is in tune with the times. The young have certain emotional problems. You mentioned the hippies and so on. I think our form of worship will have to change, but I have to confess that I don't know what those changes would be.

DR. KALIN: I've attended a couple of services in which there were certain innovations, not so much in the services themselves, as in the sermon portion. One in which there was a discussion with the congregation, which I thought was extremely effective. I don't think we've had a great deal in this direction, but we have had some.

RABBI WAX: What you're mentioning is something new. There is a great deal of experimentation going on. The service in the years past consisted of the worship, the music, and the sermon. The feeling is now that the sermon can be played down, or should be played down, and there should be a dialogue between the pastor, the rabbi, and the congregants. We did this this year, as you mentioned, and I hope that we will do it in the future.

DR. KALIN: Would you agree, recently, I can't remember where I read this, but it was not in a history of the Jews. It was in a general social history, that the three successful indigenous American religions were the Church of the Latter Day Saints, the Christian Science Church, and Reform Judaism. This author claimed that he thought that, even though there were Reform Jews in Germany, that Reform Judaism was distinctively American.

RABBI WAX: Yes, Reform Judaism, as we know it, is really American. The organizer of the Reform movement, Isaac Mayer Wise, established the institutions of Reform which always included the word American. We speak of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. We speak of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. He edited a prayer book which was entitled "Menhog America," which means "the customs of America." The Reform movement, as such, began in Germany. Isaac M. Wise, when he migrated here, realized that this was a unique place, and we would have to have a unique interpretation of Judaism. I think you can correctly say that though this is indeed historic precedents for Reform movement Judaism, that the Reform movement, as we know it, it distinctly American.

DR. KALIN: Are you optimistic about the state of Reform Judaism in the South and in America at the moment? What about the state of proselytizing?

RABBI WAX: Well, the future of Reform Judaism is really tied in with Judaism as a whole, and religion as a whole. The future of Reform Judaism and Judaism and religion in general must concern itself with this life, this world, and be involved in what is called a social action. Without social action I don't think that any kind of Judaism or any kind of religion is going to have much of a future. I think it is imperative.

DR. KALIN: Rabbi Wax, would you care to comment on members of Temple Israel who have been prominent in Memphis civic activities? There are a great many, and it might be difficult to single them out. Would there be any individual that you would consider to be outstanding as a Jew in Memphis?

RABBI WAX: Well, we do have a number of distinguished Jews. Of course, the first name that comes to mind is Mr. Abe Plough, whom I know very well, and he is a very good friend of mine. His benefactions to this city have been tremendous.

RABBI WAX: That is, benefactions in terms of money. He's a man who has a genuine love for this city and many of its people. He's a person with a sense of gratitude. He appreciates his own good fortune in life and the people that helped him when he was beginning. This has been a very important consideration in his philanthropies. I would say that he is perhaps the most distinguished Jewish Memphian. We will go to the other spectrum in terms of being distinguished to a lady who has come to prominence only in recent years. This is Mrs. Fred (Myra) Dreifus. She did a great deal for mental health and more important in recent years, a greater contribution, really, was working with and on the behalf of the poor children in the ghettos. Her leadership in getting funds for needy children; shoes, clothing and funds. She was very recently given an award by the Catholic Council of Human Relations, and she will get in June an honorary degree from Southwestern because of her great humanitarian work. Then, of course, there have been others. The Goldsmith family has always been interested in the welfare of the city. They have given of their money and their time. They are genuinely fine people, and they have contributed very much to the welfare of the city. Then there was another man who died only a year or two ago--the late Mr. Abe Scharff, who was a very generous person and gave to black and to white. He never took positions of leadership, necessarily, but he was a most generous man. I'm sure there are others whose names don't come to mind on the spur of the moment, but these are three that I would mention who deserve to be perpetuated in history.

DR. KALIN: Do you think the religion of these individuals was a deciding factor in their endeavors for humanity?

RABBI WAX: Yes, I do. It's hard to know what is the motivating factor. In the case of Mr. Plough, he's deeply conscious of his Jewishness. He served on

RABBI WAX: the board of the Temple for a number of years. He still has some part (Cont'd.)

in the important decisions. As I mentioned earlier, he has a deep sense of gratitude and a great respect, if not reverence, for the memory of his parents. Some of his benefactions are made in the name of his parents. I'm told, but I do not know if it is entirely correct, that Plough, Incorporated, is the only firm whose stock is sold on the New York Stock Exchange that closes on the Jewish high holidays. I don't know if the story is correct or hypocraphal, but Mr. Plough was asked about this. He said, "Well, if my father could keep his business closed on the high holidays, Plough, Inc., can keep closed on the high holidays."

Now, I mention this because it suggests some feeling of tradition, although he is not a traditional Jew. But certainly a respect and reverence for his parents. Mrs. Dreifus rarely attends religious services. She acknowledges that she is a Jew, and there is never any pretense that she isn't. But for her, doing good is religion. She is motivated by the desire to help people, and she is a humble person. She doesn't do it for any aggrandizement at all.

Mr. Abe Scharff is one of those men that I would say who was just instinctively good.

DR. KALIN: Would you say it is more difficult to specify what is required of the pious Reform Jew than it is to specify what is required of a pious Orthodox Jew?

RABBI WAX: I guess it is more difficult. For the Orthodox Jew everything is spelled out and put in the laws and the Torah. The ordinances of the Schulchan Aruch, which is the law book, so to speak, for the traditional Judaism. Reform

RABBI WAX: Judaism made certain decisions at the beginning. They've been modified (Cont'd.)

since, saying what we do not believe or what we do not regard as obligatory in terms of practice. And there was a change of emphasis from just sheer ritual to a community involvement. As far as I am concerned, a good Jew is one that keeps those traditions--holidays and customs that Reform Judaism has retained--but also a good Jew is one who cares and is concerned about other people. To me, this is paramount. I don't care how many customs a man keeps or even how often he worships. I'm concerned with how a person treats another person.

DR. KALIN: Has the relationship of the other rabbis been felicitous?

RABBI WAX: The late Rabbi Isadore Goodman of Baron Hirsch and I got along very well.

DR. KALIN: Yes, I have heard a number of people say this.

RABBI WAX: Yes, we understood each other and we knew each other--the weaknesses and the strengths that each had. Therefore, we could complement each other.

DR. KALIN: He was strong in the secular subjects as well?

RABBI WAX: Yes, he was a learned man in every way, in many areas. He once said to me that he did not agree with Reform Judaism, and he obviously couldn't, but he said that he respected it. We had a good relationship. His death really was a loss to me in a personal sense and also professionally. With his dying the relationship with the Orthodox community, as far as I'm concerned, that relationship isn't what it used to be. I have a very high regard for Rabbi Becker of the Conservative Synagogue. He is a gentleman in every sense of the term. We have been able to work together. I'm very pleased to say that when this conservative synagogue was established I was gratified, and the leaders there in the Beth El Synagogue will tell you that I have cooperated to the extent that I have been able to secure them some financial support. I felt that Memphis needed a conservative synagogue. Beth Shalom serves a

RABBI WAX: real need. They have had good leadership, and especially do I regard
(Cont'd.)
very highly their rabbi.

DR. KALIN: You had a great deal. . . You made a contribution to the construction
of the psychiatric hospital, I believe, which hasn't received a great deal of
attention in Memphis.

RABBI WAX: Yes, well, I was actually one of those. . .

DR. KALIN: Is this Gaylor?

RABBI WAX: No, Gaylor was established before. It really was a sort of a branch
of the John Gaston Hospital and the Medical School. I don't know the exact
relationship. The Tennessee Psychiatric Hospital here is under a sort of a
joint jurisdiction of the Department of Mental Health and the University of
Tennessee Medical School. Well, I took a lead in seeing that this hospital
was established. It's a smaller hospital than the one at Bolivar, for example,
and it really can't serve the same purpose since it's tied in with the medical
school and research is supposed to take place there. There have been some
administrative problems and so on, but with all I'm glad the hospital is here.
But my involvement really goes far beyond just the hospital here--was to get
the independent, politically free Department of Mental Health in Tennessee,
which was established, I think, in 1953. I have been on the State Board
since it was established and have tried to be above and beyond politics.
And Tennessee has made notable progress in mental health, although a great
deal remains to be done.

DR. KALIN: You talked of relationships between Reform and Orthodox Jews and
white and black. There has been a great deal written about the resurgence
of anti-semitism, perhaps in a different form. Would you, with your historical

DR. KALIN: perspective have any ideas about why there has been a growth of this (Cont'd.) anti-semitism?

RABBI WAX: Well, I think there has been a growth in anti-semitism. Still it's not a very serious problem. There has been an increase, and I think it's due to the fact that the nation has been in social upheaval in these last few years. Whenever there is turmoil, we know from history, then anti-semitism increases. It's interesting, too, and history bears this out, that the Jew thrives best during an era of liberalism. Any movement in the direction of repression-- that is a reactionary movement--during that era of repression, there is a rise in anti-semitism.

While in Memphis there is anti-semitic feeling here, I would still say that it is negligible.

DR. KALIN: You have served in various organizations and I see various offices that you have held. I have been considering doing a paper on the Cross-Cut Club. Do you think that the organization has ever served a good purpose? Do you think it's worth a paper?

RABBI WAX: No, I really don't. It was always a small discussion group that had in it at one time a maximum of twenty members, although I don't know that there were ever twenty on the roll at any one time. They used to meet once a month, except in the summer; the members would each take turns reading papers. Oh, it was nice in the sense that people of different religions and backgrounds got together, and that was regarded as a great achievement at that time. Today we would say that it is no great thing.

Then there was the question of being able to maintain the membership. Sometimes members would come into the club who really didn't have the academic background to give a very good paper. I personally felt that it wasn't worth the effort and the time, so I withdrew.

DR. KALIN: Do you have any intentions of writing after you retire?

RABBI WAX: Yes, that's the reason that if I live and retire at age 65, which is definite, I would want to write. I have been asked to write the story of my career, which wouldn't be just my career, as such. That wouldn't be important, but since most of it has been spent in Memphis, it would include an evaluative judgment of a lot of people with whom I've been associated. It is understood that after I write it, it will not be published until the year 2,000, when everybody mentioned would be deceased. I have been asked to write a history of the story of the graduates of the Hebrew Union College. That would have to be done before 1975, the 100th anniversary of the school. The reason is that most Jews--Reform Jews--do not know the contributions which the graduates of the Hebrew Union College have made. The rabbinate doesn't have the prestige that it once had, not do rabbis enjoy the respect that they once received. So many of our people do not know that the establishment of the Joint Distribution Committee that provided relief for Jews in Europe was largely the work of Reform rabbis. The United Palestine Appeal (United Jewish Appeal) was largely that of Reform rabbis. Some of the most leaders in the zionist movement who played a significant role in the establishment of the Jewish state, were graduates of the Hebrew Union College. One has to think of only one name for example, Abba Hillel Silver, and there were others. In the field of social action, which is much more popular now than it used to be, the Reform rabbis, graduates of the college, distinguished themselves.

Now, this is a very formidable task. It just isn't just a case of compiling a directory of the men and saying, "Well, they served on these committees and did such and such a thing." It's a case of examining the

RABBI WAX: contributions which a number of rabbis made in different cities. Not (Cont'd.)

only what they did in their own cities, but in the national effort, such as in the State of Israel. It's not going to be easy to gauge the impact of the Reform rabbis on the establishment of the Zionist movement and the establishment of the state, but we've had giants. And this is not known.

DR. KALIN: Do you know anything about Rabbi Eisenstadt of Philadelphia?

RABBI WAX: I know only that name. He's not a graduate of the Hebrew Union College. And this list, too you see, would not include the name of Stephen S. Wise, who was a great man. He really was. He did a lot, certainly, for Zionism, and was a great leader. He did a lot for European Jewry. European Jews, some of them, looked upon him as the Messiah during the dark days of Hitler. His name would not be included because he was not a graduate. But this is a project that I may or may not get to do. But it is one that I have been asked to do, and I hope to do.

DR. KALIN: Do you have any explanation for your love of history?

RABBI WAX: No, I really can't explain why, but even as a youngster in high school, the subject always appealed to me. Now, as an adult, I feel that the knowledge of history is extremely important. You can't understand today without a knowledge of yesterday, and if people are to be good citizens, for example, they just have to know American history.

DR. KALIN: Well, Rabbi, I shall return to speak with you again. I know that you have an appointment. I thank you very much.



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